

CRTC silences 'insulting' radio station

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Canadian Press

Wednesday, July 14, 2004

MONTREAL -- Canada's broadcasting watchdog has refused to renew the licence of a controversial Quebec City radio station after ruling it repeatedly broadcast insulting and offensive comments.

The comments were in violation of the Broadcasting Act, the CRTC said in a ruling Tuesday. Among the comments cited were ones about African students at Laval University, about psychiatric patients and about a rival morning man implicated in a teen prostitution ring.

The CRTC said CHOI will be yanked from the airwaves on Aug. 31, and the watchdog also issued a call for new applicants to fill the empty spot on the dial.

Complaints about CHOI were "with respect to the conduct of the hosts and the spoken word content that is aired, including offensive comments, personal attacks and harassment," the CRTC said.

The complaints focused primarily on a weekday morning show hosted by Jean-Francois Fillion that included a segment by radio personality Andre Arthur.

The show has been the target of 92 complaints since Genex Communications Inc. bought the station in 1997, the CRTC said.

In 2002, following 47 complaints, CHOI was given two years by the CRTC to change things. But 45 additional complaints were lodged over the following 18 months, the regulator said.

Genex president Patrice Demers accused the CRTC of muzzling freedom of speech and said he would appeal the ruling to the Federal Court of Canada.

"This is the first time that the CRTC has not renewed a licence because of expression of ideas," he told a news conference in Quebec City.

When asked how he felt about the ruling, he said he was angry and disappointed.

Demers added that "380,500 listeners will see their favourite station closed on Aug. 31 because of a decision by some Ottawa bureaucrats."

CHOI was one of two Quebec City stations whose hosts attacked rival morning man Robert Gillet following his arrest in connection with an investigation into a teen prostitute ring.

Gillet - who was later found guilty of paying for sex with a 17-year-old prostitute, but is appealing - has sued Fillion and Arthur for defamation of character.

Gillet filed a complaint with the CRTC following his arrest in December 2002. Among the remarks cited by the CRTC were comments that said Gillet travelled to Thailand and the Czech Republic.

"Look, is there someone at FM 93 (Gillet's station) who didn't know that Robert Gillet made, and

still makes, regular trips to two of the most popular places for child prostitution in the world?" the CRTC quoted CHOI as saying.

The CRTC also published a second, unrelated complaint that said Fillion suggested on May 8, 2003, that psychiatric patients should be euthanized:

"Fill up the rooms, and then there'd be a switch, and once every four months, they press the button and just a little bit of gas comes out, and then you go in and pick it all up and put it in bags."

The CRTC also looked into a Nov. 3, 2003, complaint that said Arthur described most African students at Laval University as the children of brutal dictators:

"They're the sons of plunderers, cannibals who control certain Third World countries," the CRTC quoted Arthur as saying.

In 2002, the CRTC imposed a code of conduct on the station as well as an eight-second delay for their broadcasts.

Demers was also hauled before a public CRTC hearing in February, in which he repeatedly defended the controversial remarks as fair comment.

Florian Sauvageau, head of the journalism program at Laval University, expressed concerns that the CHOI ruling threatened freedom of expression. He noted that the complaints centred on one morning show and didn't directly involve all of the station's employees.

"The CRTC has deprived afternoon journalists and hosts of their means of expression, even though they didn't cause the same problems as the morning (crew)."

But Sauvageau added the comments continued well after the CRTC raised red flags, leaving the watchdog with little choice but to crack down.

The CRTC said CHOI would be only the sixth station to be yanked off the airwaves since the watchdog's creation in 1968.

All of the stations closed were in Quebec.

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